

Plains Methodist Church
South side of Highway 280 across
from Thomas Street
Plains
Sumter County
Georgia

HABS No. GA-2211

HABS
GA,
131-PLAIN,
16-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PLAINS METHODIST CHURCH

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16-

Location: South side of Highway 280 across from the intersection of Thomas Street, in Plains, Sumter County, Georgia.

USGS Plains Georgia Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: Zone 16, E 745740 N 3546920.

Present Owner/Use: Plains United Methodist Church.

Significance: Rosalynn Carter attended this church until she married Jimmy Carter here on July 7, 1946. The brick, Romanesque-inspired structure was expanded several times to meet the needs of the congregation.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1910 as is inscribed on a northeast corner stone.
2. Original and subsequent owners: The land was given by M.L. Hudson to the trustees of the church, M.L. Hudson, Z.F. Markett, E.R. Stewart, John McDonald, A.J. Logan, T.G. Wellons, J.H. Dupree, and E.H. Cheek. Deed, September 18, 1888, recorded September 25, 1888, Deed Book V, pages 530-531, Clerks Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia,
3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The builder of the original block is unknown. Leonard Jennings built the 1937 annex and Ralph Wiggins designed and built the Fellowship Hall.¹
4. Original plans and construction: None have been located.
5. Alterations and additions:
 - 1919 Gaslight fixtures converted to electric.
 - 1937 Two-story education building added on the east side of the church.
 - 1940 Six new light fixtures donated by Rich's of Atlanta installed in the auditorium.
 - 1950 Church auditorium renovated; floors sanded, woodwork painted, rose-colored carpet runners laid; rose velvet curtain added in front of choir rail.

¹ Ralph Wiggins, 1989 interview.

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- 1956 Fellowship Hall construction begun. The window south of the crossing on the east facade was replaced with a door that leads to the hall and the annex.
- 1966 Covered walkway built from the church to the Fellowship Hall.
- 1977 Plexiglass installed over the outside of the stained-glass windows at a cost of \$7,329.
- 1981 Wall-to-wall carpeting installed in the auditorium and educational building.²

B. Historical Context: Methodism was very strong in Sumter County many years before the town of Plains was founded. The earliest record of Methodists in the Plains area is dated 18 March 1848, when ten churches existed in the Americus circuit. The account also refers to the Tabernacle Church, located about three miles north of the present town of Plains, which was the direct predecessor of the Plains Methodist Church. In 1865, the Tabernacle Church congregation gave its frame building to a black Methodist congregation and bought a building near Magnolia Springs.³

The church was moved to its present site in the 1880s when many inhabitants of settlements in Lebanon, Magnolia Springs, and the Plain of Dura moved to lands owned by Milton Leander Hudson, near the site of the narrow-gauge Americus, Preston and Lumpkin (AP&L) Railroad built in 1885. Hudson was a member of the Methodist church and in 1888 donated some of his property near the railroad as a church site.⁴ The congregation renamed itself the Plains Methodist Church and built a frame structure with a porch supported by columns. At that time, the pastor was H. Stubbs and the Sunday school superintendent was E.R. Stewart, who served in that capacity until his death in 1939. In 1910, the frame building was torn down and the brick church was erected. The cornerstone on the building listed the pastor at that time as J.M. Rustin, and the building committee of John McDonald, R.S. Oliver, E.R. Stewart, W.S. Moore, and R.M. Andrews. The church was dedicated in mid-October 1912. Services were held every second and fourth Sunday. The first wedding in the church, in 1911, united George Stafford Addy and Miss Ophie Markett, who was a first-grade teacher at the Plains School and had all her students participate in the service.

Another wedding of note was performed by the Reverend C.M. Infinger when Jimmy Carter married Rosalynn Smith on July 7, 1946. The church service started early and the organist had already played "Here Comes the Bride" once before the couple finally made it down the aisle.⁵ Rosalynn had been

² Walters, 1981.

³ Walters, 1981, p. 1.

⁴ Deed Book V, pp. 530-531.

⁵ J. and R. Carter, 1988 interview.

active in the church and saw it as a focus of her social and spiritual life. She remembers the day when she was standing on the church steps after a youth activity, and Jimmy drove up in a car with a rumble seat to ask Rosalynn out on their first date.⁶ After marrying Jimmy, Rosalynn joined the Plains Baptist church where he was a member.

The United Methodist Church was expanded in 1937 when Mamie McDonald Bradley donated funds for a two-story education building to be erected in honor of her parents, the J. A. McDonalds. The complex was enlarged again in the 1950s during the pastorate of Reverend I. L. Bishop, when a fellowship hall was constructed behind the church. The \$15,000 building was dedicated at the annual homecoming service in 1957 and a cornerstone lists Dr. J.C. Logan, Ralph Wiggins, J.W. Sewell, Charles w. Smith, H.W. Smith, Leroy Young, Charlie Vaughn, and R.M. Andrews as members of the building committee.

The church has received honors over the years, being named the Rural Church of the Year in the Americus District in 1960, under the pastorate of the Reverend Charles Culbreath Jr. It also received the World Parish Citation in 1979 and 1980, under the pastorate of Reverend Charles Houston. In 1981 the church sent a missionary group to Haiti. The church is active in community affairs, joining with the Baptist and Lutheran churches for Thanksgiving and Easter services and monthly "singsperation" services. The present pastor is the Reverend William Jackson-Adams.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This traditional church building features Romanesque-inspired round arches. The two steeples flanking the nave were common in churches of this period in the region.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The original church block is a bilaterally symmetrical, Latin-cross plan about 50' wide at the crossing and 70' long. The nave is about 20' wide. Two 8'-6" square towers are located at the north junctures of the nave and crossing arms. The three gable ends each have three bays; on each side facade there are two bays north of the crossing and one bay to the south.

A front-facing, two-story, rectangular annex is connected to the east wall of the east tower by a long hall with eight bays on the

⁶ R. Carter, 1988 interview.

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north/front facade. This block has three bays on the front facade, four on the east and west facades, and two on the back.

Behind the church is the one-story rectangular Fellowship Hall, connected to the original building by a door in the bay south of the crossing on the east facade. It has four bays on the west side, three on the east, and six on the south.

2. Foundations: Brick with a header course watertable; the foundation of the original church block has decorative semicircular vents with rowlock sills, arches consisting of a header course over a rowlock course, and a cast-iron panel with a decorative motif.
The 1937 annex has rectangular vents in the foundation. The 1950s Fellowship Hall has a concrete-slab foundation.
3. Walls: The unusual brick pattern in the original structure is a running bond with a row of alternating headers and stretchers every five courses. The annex is brick laid in running bond.
4. Structural system, framing: Original church and 1937 annex are load-bearing brick; the 1950s education building is concrete block with brick veneer.
5. Porches, stoops: Brick steps with wingwalls lead to the small stoops in front of the two main entrances in the steeples. Four concrete steps with brick wingwalls, concrete coping, and metal pipe rails lead to a stoop under the door on the east side of the south facade of the 1937 annex. A long handicapped-access ramp leads to the door in the third bay from the east of the hall, which connects the 1937 annex to the church proper. A large canopy supported on three metal poles covers a concrete patio in back of the Fellowship Hall.
6. Chimneys: The original structure has an exterior brick chimney in the southwest corner at the juncture of the nave and crossing arms, adjacent to the basement entrance. It probably served a coal or wood stove in the basement. An exterior gable-end chimney on the south side of the two-story annex serves a large fireplace on the first floor.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Double, wood six-panel doors on the north walls of each steeple are the main entrances to the church. They have semicircular stained-glass fanlights above the transoms, and are topped by brick arches consisting of three courses of rowlocks with corbelling at the springlines. A six-cross-panel door leads to a basement on the south end of the west facade of the original structure.

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The 1937 annex has three six-light, three cross-panel doors; one in the third bay of the eight-bay hall, one in the back of this hall leading to the breezeway to the 1950 annex, and one in the second bay on the east side of the chimney on the south facade.

The doors in the Fellowship Hall are two-light, flush, hollow core.

- b. Windows and shutters: All glazing in the original block is stained-glass with rowlock sills. The three gable ends each contain a band of three rectangular windows flanked by single arch-headed windows. Arch-headed windows are also on each side of the nave north of the crossing arms and on the west facade south of the crossing arms. The east facade had a corresponding window south of the crossing, which was replaced with a door when the enclosed walk to the Fellowship Hall was added. The triple wood windows are all topped by a fanlight and a brick arch consisting of four courses of projecting rowlocks with corbels at the springline. The single-arched windows have similar corbelling and brick arches consisting of three courses of projecting rowlocks.

Glazing in the 1937 annex consists of six-over-six-light, double-hung sash with rowlock sills; those in the first and second stories of the east and west facades are paired, and the windows across the eight-bay hall and the north and south facades are single.

The windows in the 1950 annex and the enclosed connecting hall are metal two-over-two-light, double-hung sash with concrete sills.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A cross-gable roof with a hip on the back covers the original building. The 1937 annex has a rectangular gable roof with a shed roof over the hall on the north. The roof of the original structure and the shed roof on the annex are clad with asphalt shingles. The gable roof on the two-story annex is covered with a standing-seam metal roof.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The roof on the church block and two-story annex has a white wood cornice and no eaves. The Fellowship Hall has boxed eaves.
- c. Steeples: Two 8'-6" square steeples where the north walls of the crossing arms meet the nave serve as entrance vestibules, each having a door on the north wall. Both towers are the same height, with beltcourses about 1' below the cornices. The west

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steeple, is about three-quarters of the height of the east steeple and is topped with a pyramidal asphalt-shingled roof. The east tower is topped by a large lantern with a segmental-arched vent on the north side and plain white piers on four corners that extend up through the cornice about half as high as the spire. The lantern is clad with decorative pressed metal painted dark red. The cladding of the pyramidal spire is identical but painted silver.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Original church block: Approximately 48' x 32', this bilaterally symmetrical floor plan contains three sets of curved pews (six) forming a semicircle facing the altar at the south end. North of this is an approximately 27' x 18' area for overflow seating with two rows of eight pews and a central aisle. This area can be closed off by three large doors that drop down from within the wall above. The two vestibules in the steeples have interior doors leading through the back wall of the main sanctuary and to the side walls of the overflow area. The apse on the south end contains the choir.

1937 addition: A door added to the east wall of the east steeple leads to a hallway that connects the annex to the original building. A door in the south wall of the hall leads to a covered breezeway connecting with the Fellowship Hall. A small office has been partitioned off by a balustered rail at the east end of this hall. Another hall runs from the south wall of this hall south through the annex. This hall has two rooms on the east side and leads to a large room across the south end of the annex. A stairway on the west wall at the north end of the hall leads to the second floor. Behind the stairwell is a small office.

Fellowship Hall: The west half of the Fellowship Hall is a large dining/meeting area. Along the west wall, a kitchen area has been partitioned off, as well as men's and women's rest rooms. A hall leads from the center of the east wall of the large room to the door on the east wall of the building. There is a small library to the north of this hall and a nursery to the south.

- b. Second floor: 1937 annex: A large landing at the top of the stairs has doors leading to four large rooms. The southeast room has two large storage closets off the south wall.

2. Stairways: A narrow stairway leads from the first to the second floor of

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the 1937 annex. Two steps in the north end of the west hall of the hall run from east to west to a square landing, where there is a north-to-south run of thirteen risers to the second floor. The wood handrail on the east side of the stairs has two square balusters per riser. Nine wood stairs running north to south lead from the landing in back of the sanctuary to the hall leading to the Fellowship Hall.

3. Flooring: The church proper and overflow area have green wall-to-wall carpeting over a tongue-and-groove wood floor. The two steeple vestibules have brown indoor-outdoor carpet. The hall leading to the 1937 annex slopes slightly downward and is covered with linoleum tile. The rooms on the first and second floors are carpeted and the floor in the second floor hall is wood. The Fellowship Hall has a concrete floor covered with linoleum tile. The library and nursery are carpeted.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The wood tongue-and-groove ceiling in the sanctuary is canted and supported by four ornamented wood trusses. Elsewhere the ceilings are plastered. The walls of the sanctuary are plaster painted pale green. The walls in the 1937 annex are also plaster. Walls in the Fellowship Hall, as well as the hall leading to it from the sanctuary, are concrete block. The ceiling in the Fellowship Hall is acoustical tile.
5. Doorways and doors: Four sets of six-panel swinging doors lead from the two vestibules to the sanctuary and into the overflow section. These doors are topped by fanlights. Three large openings between the sanctuary and the overflow area can be closed off by wood doors that can be pulled down out of the wall above. The handles on these doors have metal plates that are inscribed "J.G. Wilson Mfg. Co., N.Y. Pat. 1890."
All doors in the 1937 annex are two-panel plywood. A flush hollow-core door leads from the back of the sanctuary to the covered hallway to the Fellowship Hall.
6. Decorative features and trim: The church is trimmed with elaborate crown moldings and a 2'-3" chair rail that runs along the sills of the windows surrounds the sanctuary and overflow area. All windows and doors are housed in thick wood frames with corner blocks. An eight-panel choir rail runs along the back of the altar and a turned baluster rail surrounds the semicircular lectern area. All wood trim in the church is dark-brown mahogany.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The building is heated by gas and has a central air conditioner. There is a circular louvered

roof ventilator in the front gable of the 1937 annex, and semicircular roof ventilators flank the chimney on the rear.

- b. Lighting: Seven electric chandeliers hang in the church block; two in the overflow area, two along the side aisle, and a larger one centered over the nave. Both vestibules have hanging lights. All classrooms in the 1937 annex have ceiling fixtures.
- c. Plumbing: The rest rooms in the Fellowship Hall each contain a toilet and sink. There is a sink on the west wall of the Fellowship Hall in the kitchen area.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: The church faces north onto Highway 280 west of the commercial core, amid primarily residences. Paved walkways lead from the sidewalk along the highway to each of the three front entries. A small courtyard was created between the three sections of the church. Shrubs and trees are planted in this area, and there are several stone benches. A covered walkway with an aluminum roof connects the back of the hall leading to the 1937 annex to the Fellowship Hall.
- 2. Outbuildings: The congregation owns the home situated west of the church on Highway 280, which serves as a rectory.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings: None have been located.

B. Interviews:

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, videotaped interview by Ed Bearss, National Park Service, 1988, Plains, Georgia.

Ralph Wiggins, local builder, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, August 23, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

C. Bibliography:

- 1. Primary and unpublished sources: Deed Books, Clerk's Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia.
- 2. Secondary and published sources:

"History of the Plains United Methodist Church," compiled by Mrs. C.L. Walters, Jr. 1981.

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